

The Essentials of Time and Space

Many of us can recall method courses we took during our pre-service teacher education programs. There were courses on reading, math, the sciences, and such. A few of us took a course on teaching writing, though such courses are offered only sporadically at teacher preparation institutes across the country. We probably took a course on discipline and management. It's odd how little attention was given to those two areas that so greatly influence teaching and learning in schools: time and space.

How does our use of time influence what students can and cannot do? How does the physical environment of the classroom affect the way students learn and teachers teach? What do time and space have to do with kids learning to write?

Through his books and his research, Donald Graves has had a major impact on the teaching of writing. One day a teacher asked Don, "How should I teach writing if I can only sandwich it in one day a week?" "Don't bother," Don replied bluntly. "One day a week will teach them to hate it. They'll never get inside writing."

It is crucial for students to have frequent, predictable time set aside for them to write. Plan to schedule a minimum of three days a week for about an hour each day. Four or five days is even better. It's important that students know when the workshop is scheduled so that they are ready to meet it. When students know they'll have a specific time to return to a piece of writing in progress, they think about that work when they are away from their desks.

When we were in school, most of our teachers randomly assigned writing assignments: "Okay boys and girls. We're going to write today." No wonder it was so hard to get the engine going! And once it did start humming (*if it did*), there was little reason to keep it going. Few of us had the chance to discover what happens when you get into a rhythm of writing regularly.

You may be thinking, with a sense of panic, "Okay, but I don't have three hours a week to spare!" Of course not. Yet many successful writing teachers have found ways to hurdle the time issue. They've done this by scrutinizing their schedules and pruning out other, less effective methods they are using to teach students writing skills. These include discrete language arts lessons, taught in isolation, and writing assignments connected to curriculum but disconnected to one another.

A teacher might say: "But I already do a lot of writing with my students. They keep journals and we work on class writing proj-

ects as an extension of our social studies and science units. I also do a big poetry unit every spring that the kids and I love. Do these fit with writers' workshop?"

To answer this question, it's important to carefully consider the purpose of each of these writing activities. Consider journal writing. If you use journal writing mainly as a way to communicate with students (i.e., they write each day, you read and respond), then journal writing serves a purpose other than those met by writing workshop. You may decide to continue using it. But journal writing used this way alone will not develop your students' writing skills.

On the other hand, if your purpose for journal writing focuses on helping students feel comfortable with writing, you may find that journals serve the same purpose as writing workshop. True, journal writing may be more manageable because it keeps the writing in one place and creates a nice history of students' growth. But you could forgo the time devoted to journals and instead have students use writer's notebooks within the writing workshop. The writer's notebook differs from a journal. Encourage students to use the notebook to experiment with writing techniques as well as a place to record important thoughts, feelings, seed ideas, and dreams.

Let's assume you have tackled the time demon and carved out regular class time for the workshop. It's also important for students to plan how they will use *their* time. The wording here is deliberate. When we suggest you schedule time to write, three days a week, we are referring to a workshop environment where student choice is prevalent; where students decide when a piece of writing is finished; where students set their own agendas and their own pace.

Why is choice so important? Let's get right down to it: while the teachers may determine what gets taught, only the student can decide what will be learned. This is true for learners of any age. We learn best when we have a reason that propels us to want to learn.

When students have an authentic purpose for their writing—whether to document an important event in their lives, get classmates to laugh, or communicate a message that matters—they pay *attention differently to instruction*. Our students know best which topics and purposes for writing matter most to each of them. Letting them choose their own topics and set their own purposes makes it a lot more likely they'll be engaged and receptive.

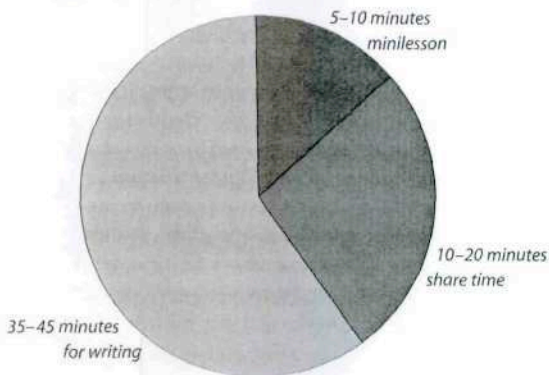
These are big tasks; students will need our careful attention and coaching to do them well. The structure of the workshop helps teachers provide what young writers need. In the same way that a *predictable schedule is important for your students*, the *regularity* of the workshop structure also matters. While individual teachers have added their own rituals and routines, three basic components should be present in your workshop: (1) time for whole-group instruction (often referred to as a minilesson), (2) time for writing, and (3) time for structured response (as a whole class or in small groups). A typical hour broken into these three components is illustrated in Figure 2–1. Let's take a closer look at what the hour entails.

Minilessons

Of all the workshop components, the minilesson looks closest to what we associate with traditional teaching. Minilessons are short focused, and direct. The teacher has something to teach, and she gathers together the students to teach it. The topic of the minilesson varies according to the needs of the class, but it typically falls into one of the following categories:

- Procedural (important information about how the workshop runs—how to get or use materials, where to confer with a friend, etc.)

Figure 2-1 Components of an hour-long writing workshop



- Writer's process (strategies writers use to help them choose, explore, or organize a topic, cut-and-paste techniques for revising a piece, etc.)
- Qualities of good writing (information to deepen students' understandings of literary techniques; use of the scene, influence of point of view, strong language, leads and endings, etc.)
- Editing skills (information to develop their understanding of spelling, punctuation, and grammatical skills)

The correlation with traditional instruction stops there. A minilesson is not meant to direct the course of action for the rest of the workshop. This is a time to introduce an important skill (for

example, how strong verbs improve writing), but we shouldn't expect students to spend the next forty minutes practicing it. Rather, teachers use the minilesson to introduce one idea/skill/strategy that seems relevant and timely for a particular group of writers. Teachers might direct students to practice the skill *during* the minilesson, as with the following instruction: "Choose a page in your writer's notebook and circle the verbs. Can you think of a stronger verb that might replace the ones that you are using?"

But when the minilesson ends, students return to their ongoing writing projects, with the focus once again on the goals and intentions they've set out for themselves. It may feel funny to put forth a skill or strategy that your students don't immediately apply in their writing. But you can be sure that such instruction will broaden their visions as writers, and they will bring this broader vision to their work.

Writing Time

Teachers devote most of the workshop time to actual writing. Beware of having your students spend this time completing teacher-assigned writing projects. This may be considered writing, and may have its own value, but it is not what happens in a *writing workshop*.

In the first chapter we briefly described the look and feel of the workshop. The room hums with the productive sound of writers at work. During this time, students work on the writing projects they have set out for themselves. Kids are rough drafting, planning, rereading, proofreading, or conferring with other students. Most teachers use this time to move around the room and confer with students as they write. This is the crux of the workshop. We devote Chapter 5 to a close look at the writing conference.

Share Time

Response occurs throughout the workshop in the form of teacher-student and student-student conferences. But you'll probably also want to schedule a special time for students to share their writing with the whole class. In these share sessions, you coach students in how to give and receive response to each other's writing. Some teachers designate a special Author's Chair for this purpose.

A third-grade boy sitting in the Author's Chair with his classmates around him is getting ready to share a draft he is working on.

"What kind of help do you need from us?" the teacher asks.

Michael shrugs. The truth is, he's not sure what kind of help he needs. That's okay. The teacher has planted the seed of an important idea with that question. Over time your students come to realize that it is helpful when writers direct the kind of response they need.

"Okay, Michael," the teacher says, "would you like to read your piece aloud?"

Michael nods and starts to read:

I went camping last weekend. We had to hike almost four miles, and by the time we got there I had a blister on my foot as big as a Skittles. First we set up our tents. Then we got a big pile of dry wood for the fire. My dad and the other father took a walk. But when they were gone the wind start blowing. These sparks came shooting out of the fire, and caught onto some dry leaves. Then we had another fire! My friend's big brother, Will, came running up. He was yelling really loud—"Pull that wood back! Move that pile of firewood! Give me that water!" The good thing was he dumped water onto the fire and put it out, but the bad thing was we didn't have much water left to drink.

"Wow!" the teacher says to Mike. "Does anyone have a comment or a question for Mike?"

"I like when you said your blister was big as a Skittles," one boy says, licking his lips. "I love to eat them!"

"You eat blisters?" one girl asks him. The kids giggle. Michael smiles.

"It must've been scary when the fire started," one girl says.

"Kind've," Michael admits. "After that my dad made a rule that one of the grown-ups had to watch the fire."

As the students respond to Michael, the teacher is listening carefully to see how able they are to confirm what he has done. These kids are doing pretty well.

"Did Will put out both fires with the water?" one boy wants to know.

"No, just the fire in the dry leaves," Michael replies.

"How did he know how to put out the fire?" one girl asks.

"He's a fireman," Michael explains.

"But he's in high school, isn't he?" the girl persists.

"Well, I think he's like a volunteer fireman," Mike tells her.

The girl nods. Her confusion is gone. But this teacher knows that oral clarity is different from clear writing. She decides to intervene and direct the student to look at that part of his draft.

"Michael, you answered those two questions and that cleared up our confusion," the teacher says. "But I want you to go back and take a close look at that part. See if you have written it clearly enough, okay?"

Michael bends forward, rereading his writing.

In this scene we see that share time is for more than just celebrating student writing—it can be a great teaching time, too. Your role in this share session directs students to act in ways that will help them when they are conferring one-on-one with peers. Over time,

you'll want to talk explicitly about what makes for good response. The share session gives you a fine opportunity to model it.

The above example describes a whole-class share. Many teachers who work with older students opt for smaller response groups instead. When students begin drafting longer pieces it makes sense to give them steady response partners who can listen more regularly as a piece evolves over time. Of course, students need coaching in this response setting, too. If you begin with whole-group response, you'll find that students can often transfer the skills they learn in the larger setting to this smaller one.

The response group is an example of how you might fine-tune the share. But let's not get ahead of ourselves. For now, it's enough to remember this: kids need regular, predictable time to write. This is as essential as water and light to a plant. They need this time to establish purposes for their writing, and time to achieve those purposes. The more actively engaged students are, the more time you have to coach and instruct them as they grow as writers.

Space

Space affects us. It invites us to act. Consider how much time we spend creating comfortable spaces where we can do the work we love. Maybe you have a special place in which you like to write—the local corner deli, or the quiet of your office as you curl into an overstuffed chair. We think carefully about the space we need to

work, the tools we want at hand, our proximity to or distance from others. We need to bring that same considerate eye to the classroom as we design the space to accommodate the needs of twenty-five or so idiosyncratic writers.

There are certain physical requirements for a writing workshop. We include here the elements that we consider important, and thoughts on each to guide your decision-making process.

A Meeting Place

You will need a gathering space large enough for your entire class to meet. You'll gather here for minilessons and whole-class response sessions. This might be the spot where you read aloud. It may be a large corner that is set up as a quiet place for students to stretch out on the floor to work. There will be times when you will want to pull students away from their desks to focus on group minilessons or individual students as they share their writing.

A Place for Materials and Tools

Writers, like all craftspeople, need access to their tools. A writer's tools may include:

- Paper, pencils, notebooks, and computers for drafting
- Folders for keeping their work organized
- Scissors, tape, stapler for revising
- Dictionaries, thesauri, word lists, checklists, colored pens for editing
- Trade books for inspiration and technique

Where will these tools be stored? Some teachers establish a Writing Center, where students can go to retrieve necessary sup-

plies. This sounds fancy, though it doesn't have to be more than a small table in the corner of the room, or a cart that can be wheeled to the center of the room during workshop. There will be a steady stream of students coming from and going to this center, so think carefully about where you situate it.

Other teachers bring the materials to their students by placing caddies with most-frequently-used items at the center of student tables. You will find what works for you.

Carefully Arranged Desks or Tables

There are a number of factors to consider here. First: comfort. We believe people need to be comfortable to do their best work. This means that young writers should have access to spaces in the room other than their own desks. Some students like to write on a clipboard as they stretch out on the floor. Others prefer working at a desk that is pushed off into a quiet corner. Ask your students to think with you about how the space should be used during writing time.

Consider your one-to-one conferences. Where will you meet to discuss an individual's writing? While some teachers assign a spot where students come to them, we strongly encourage teachers to go to the students for conferences (stay tuned for Chapter 5). A lot of good teaching takes place in teacher-student conferences. While conferences are designed for a particular student, you will find that nearby students will eavesdrop and also benefit. Cluster desks into groups of four or six so your teaching can spill outside the parameters of a single conference. Clusters of desks also makes it easier for students to ask for and receive help from each other.

Try to envision this space. Place your students in the classroom and watch how they move. Don't forget to put yourself there too. Can you picture yourself conferring with individual writers? Watch

as Scott moves from his desk to the Writing Center to get a sheet of paper. Can he move efficiently without having to squeeze through a crowd of desks? Where are the quiet spaces in the room? Where are the places that talk can occur productively? Does the room have enough texture that individual students can find the sort of spaces they need to feel comfortable?

Look on the walls. In one third-grade classroom students can look to the wall of their classroom library to find a reminder of how to choose a topic.

Where Do Writers Get Ideas?

Rereading their notebooks

Browsing through literature

Talking with a friend

Revisiting old drafts

The best teachers leave traces of their teaching throughout the classroom. This encourages students to continue to practice particular habits of thought. Physical reminders also free the teacher from being the only source of information. Ann Marie Corgill hung this chart in her third-grade classroom, reminding children of the particular ways they can get help from their peers.

How Can I Help?

Rebecca: trimming the shrubs/sticking to the point

Chelsea: creating believable characters

David Sh: making comparisons/seeing likeness in unlike things

Alice: writing poetry

Meghan: effective leads

Linley: effective endings

John Br: editing for spelling

Robert: giving helpful suggestions/comments

Angela: understanding and explaining the writing rubric
Bradley & Kelly: illustrating
Bobby, John Br. Hurly, Kelly: writing non-fiction with voice
Lydia: using watercolors

Look at the walls again. Is there evidence (student writing, author's quotes, etc.) of the important work that is taking place? When your colleagues come into your room, can they see how you and the students value writing? Can they learn about your students simply by "reading" the room?

The writing workshop is fueled by the unique and boundless energy of your students. Time and space contour the container that will harness that energy.

Making It Work in the Classroom

- ▶ Look at your weekly schedule. Find three to five time blocks of fifty minutes or more to devote to writing.
- ▶ If your schedule appears full to the brim, ask yourself: What lessons or other activities could the writing workshop replace? Are there times already devoted to writing or language work? If so, what purposes do these serve? Might they be better served with writers' workshop?
- ▶ Let your class know when writers' workshop will be.
- ▶ Ask your students to talk about what they need in order to make the classroom a comfortable place to write.
- ▶ Based on this input draw a map of the classroom and share it with them.
- ▶ In the early weeks of the workshop keep asking the question, "Have we created a comfortable place for writing?" Be willing to make changes along the way as you find what works for you and this particular group of students.